

## *The Lawyer's Secret*

It was in a luxuriously furnished room where a glowing grate threw genial light and warmth upon the occupants that General Langton, lawyer and millionaire, listening with baited breath and pallid cheeks to a low and melodious voice that told a story of life.

The speaker, a beautiful woman of about thirty, yet ten years younger than Mr. Langton, reclined in a low, cushioned chair, her attitude both speaking of the ease that wealth gives, but her face was full of the deepest anguish as her lips recounted the story.

“You love me,” she said gently yet sadly, “and I love you as I never loved any one before, although I am a widow. That you know, but did not know my husband’s name. By my uncle’s last request I dropped it and took his with the property he had left me. Do not look at me tenderly, Gerald, do not shake my voice or my heart, for when you know who I am you will not repeat the offer you made me, and which heaven is my witness I tried to divert.”

“Let your conscience be at rest there,” said her listener, in a grave, yet tender voice; “you have never given me one hope, Maude. By what instinct I knew that you loved me I can never tell. Something in your eyes—some tone of your voice betrayed you. If, as you say, something in your past life does separate us, you have been no coquette to torment me with false hopes. But, Maude, tell me again, whatever stands between us, you love me.”

“Love you,” she said gravely, “and it is because I love that I will not let you link your honorable name with that of the wretch who was my husband. I was very young—not sixteen—when he came to make a visit to some friends living at Grassbank. Uncle Richard has a country seat near the village. I first met Alexander at a picnic, where he was the very life of the party; everybody’s cavalier; courteous to all; full of wit and animation and service to all. I believe every girl on the grounds thought she had captivated him, his attentions were so well divided and yet so impressive to each one. He claimed to be no more than a salesman in a large wholesale house, with a good salary, but he had the manners of a gentleman of education, and the most perfect beauty of face and form that I ever saw in a man. It was not long before it was evident that he wished to win my love, and he had an easy task. Such love as a child of sixteen can give I gave him. He was the impersonation of every hero of poetry and fiction with whom my limited reading had made me familiar. School-girl like, I had made an ideal hero, and fitted this, my first admirer, with all his imaginary perfections.

“From the first Uncle Richard disliked him, pronouncing him false and shallow, and assuring me that my personal attractions had not won his heart; but the fact of my being an heiress to a large property gained me the protestations in which if so firmly believed.

“It is a painful story to me now, Gerald. Let it suffice that I have lived in a world of pleasant dreams while Alexander remained at Grassbank. When he left me he carried my promise to be his wife at Christmas.

“I think if my money had depended on Uncle Richard, my marriage might have been prevented

by his threatening to disinherit me, but both from my father and mother I had inherited money that made me independent in a pecuniary sense of his control or consent.

“Most grudgingly, however, uncle did consent, after searching inquiry about Alexander, resulting in no worse report than that his employers thought him fast, idle, and just the man to be a fortune hunter. Even then my dear uncle would have protected my fortune by settling it upon myself; but with the reckless generosity of extreme youth I refused to have this done. Never, I was firmly convinced, would my adored Alexander wrong me in any way.

“For a year after the splendid wedding that made me Alexander’s wife I was very happy. I was too ignorant of value to understand that we were living far beyond our income—enjoyed to the utmost the luxuries around me—the constant gaiety that was in such strong contrast to the school routine from which I had been released.

“Then began a life of neglect, often of quarreling, when I objected to my husband’s course of conduct—his drinking, his extravagance and his late hours. Still I found my own pleasures in society.

“It was four years after my marriage when I was thunderstruck by Alexander asking me to request a loan of money from Uncle Richard, with the information added that every penny of my property was gone.

“Since then I have known that a large portion of it was lost at the gaming table.

“Long before this I had lost all love for my husband. Respect had died out when I knew the dissipated life he was leading, and foolish as I was, I could not continue to love a man whom I despised. I refused the errand and brought down a torrent of such great abuse that I really expected that Alexander would end by striking me.

“Day after day the request was renewed, but I would not yield. Upon my marriage, Uncle Richard had sold the city residence and taken a permanent abode at Grassbank, where, knowing my husband to be an unwelcome guest, I never visited him. I wrote occasionally, but the love of years, like that of a father and child, had been so sadly strained by my persistence in marrying Alexander that even our correspondence was languid and commonplace.

“I would not, therefore, write to him to ask a favor that I knew would not have been necessary without criminal recklessness of expenditure, and such refusal made my husband more furious. Then came an overwhelming blow. Alexander forged a check and drew £2,000 of Uncle Richard’s money from the bank. I don’t think my uncle would have prosecuted him had he guessed who was the forger; but he handed the whole matter over to the law as soon as it was discovered that the check was forged. It was then traced to Alexander, and at the same time it was found that he had robbed in the same manner his former employers. He had given up all work on his marriage; but when he found himself without money his knowledge of the business enabled him to forge the name of Derkiss & Co. Even if Uncle Richard had spared him for my sake the other forgery would have entitled him to penal servitude. He was sentenced to seven

years, and uncle took me home full of heavenly pity and forgiveness for the child who had treated him so ungratefully.”

“Then your husband is in prison?” said Gerald, in a hard, strained voice.

“No, no, he is dead! He died within the first year. Uncle Richard saw the death in a paper, and sent the money for the burial. No, I am free; but none the less, I am the widow of a convicted felon.”

“But, none the less,” Gerald quoted, “the woman I love and honor above all others, and hope still to make my wife.”

It took, however, more than one interview, full of love’s pleading, to win Maude from her resolution. She so honored her lover, and was so proud of his good name and the position he had attained by his talent, that her sensitive nature shrunk from even the shadow of her misery upon his life.

But the victory was won at last, and the lawyer walked home one evening full of a proud, glad joy, for Maude had then promised to be his wife.

“If you are willing to take Alexander Hull’s widow to be your wife,” she said, “I will not oppose you any longer, for I love you with all my heart.”

He had no thought but of that glad triumph when he turned up the gas in his office. He was in the habit of making a late visit there before going up to his bed-room, in case notes or messages were left for him. One lay there on this evening, a shabby looking envelope, but directed in a bold, handsome hand, which he recognized at once.

He tore it open. After a few words of introduction, the note ran:

“You did the best you could on my trial, but the facts were too strong for you. I have now a last favor to ask of you. I die, as you know, at noon to-morrow. You, as my lawyer, can see me at any time. Will you come as soon as you receive this, and with the gratitude of the man you know as JAMES FOX.”

“The man I know as James Fox,” muttered the lawyer; “the smooth, plausible scoundrel who actually made me believe him innocent of the hideous murder for which he was convicted. I can find extenuation for some murders, but this cold-blooded assassination of an old man for money only was revolting. How he deceived me, though, for a time. And how he exulted in doing so when he saw the facts were too strong. Shall I go to him? I suppose I must. It is still very early.

It was not yet midnight when Gerald Langton was ushered into the cell of the man who in a few short hours was to meet the extreme penalty of the law for the worst of crimes. Yet there was nothing revolting in the appearance of the criminal. His dress was neat, his hair carefully arranged, his moustache faultless, his hands white and refined looking. He rose from his seat upon the bed as his lawyer entered the cell.

“I knew you would come,” he said, courteously, “though you were offended at my want of frankness. Well, that is all over. You will not refuse the last request of a dying man, Mr. Langton?”

“Not if I can grant it,” was the reply.

“This,” said the murderer, “is not my first offense against the law. Some years ago I was sentenced to a term of years for forgery. By a strange accident I escaped the penalty. On the same day James Fox was sentenced to two years for petty larceny, and we were sent together to prison. James Fox—my companion, understand, not myself—was deranged, but his lawyers had not been able to save him, as his aberration was not always apparent. When we were entered upon the books of the prison, imagine my surprise when my fellow prisoner gave my name for his own. Like a flash I saw the advantage to be gained by the deception, and allowed the error to pass. My companion committed suicide, and I escaped with two years’ imprisonment instead of seven. But I feared recognition and went to Canada. There I lived by my wits until a year ago, when I returned to try and raise money from my wife, and thought I saw an easier plan by committing the crime for which I die to-morrow. But I want to see my wife. I wronged her—I robbed her—but heaven is my witness, I love her. When I was in prison she dropped my name and took her own again. So it is not for Mrs. Alexander Hull you must ask, but for Mrs. Maude Temple.”

Was the room reeling—the ceiling falling—the wall closing around him? Gerald Langton felt that they were, as the name fell upon his ears. Maude—his Maude—the wife of the cool villain who talked of his hideous crimes as if they were ordinary events? Well, he knew that to carry the man’s message was to separate himself from Maude forever. Never would she let him marry the widow of a murderer! Very rapidly all the terrible facts passed one after the other, and he said: “If you love her, why add a misery to her life? She may have lived down the old pain you have caused her; why, for a selfish gratification, will you make her whole life a misery?”

“She is my wife! I would bid her farewell.”

“She is not your wife. Your own crimes have released her from all allegiance to you.”

“You know her?”

“Yes. I know what she has suffered, and beg of you to let her still believe you died years ago.”

“She is happy?”

“Scarcely that. Such wounds as hers never heal entirely, but it is cruelty to tear them open when they are quiet.”

“Has she married?”

“No! She is your widow.”

“It is hard to deny myself one more sight of her face and the hope I had that she would say she forgave me.”

“Think of her, not yourself.”

There was a long silence in the cell.

Every throb of Gerald Layton’s heart was pain to him, but Alexander Hull sat in moody silence; evidently reluctant to give up his wish.

At last he spoke.

“You have been very good to me. Tell me, now, if you have any personal reason for your request. Perhaps you may love her.”

“I do!” was the reply. “She has promised to be my wife.”

“Then it will be James Fox who is hanged to-morrow. I meant to give my real name, but I will carry my secret to the grave. It may be in another world that the little self-denial will be a plea for me. Go now. You may trust me.”

He kept his word, and Gerald Langton his secret.

When Maude, a few weeks later, became his wife, she little guessed the terrible ordeal which he had spared her, or the added disgrace that belonged to the name she had given up.

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